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# Adonis on Conflicts, Wars and Crises in the Middle East: Poetical Answers and Political Readings of the Past

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I sin bok *Våld och islam* (svensk översättning 2016) har den syriske poeten Adonis gett sin bild av varför situationen ser ut som den gör i Mellanöstern. Enligt Adonis utgör den islamiska traditionen och ett allt för starkt fasthållande vid traditionen ett problem som förhindrar förnyelse och nytänkande. Även om Adonis ger sin bild av situationen är det uppenbart att hans analys saknar viktiga nyanser. Istället för att peka på interna variationer och motsättningar kring hur exempelvis både religionen islam har tolkats och förstått och hur muslimer har debatterat vad som kan avses med tradition så målar Adonis, speciellt i *Våld och islam*, en negativ bild där variation, motsättningar och konflikter nedtonas. Dessa läsningar av historien är dock inget nya för Adonis och han har vid flera tillfällen framhållit dessa teman i sin poesi och essäer.

NYCKELORD: Adonis, poesi, tradition, demokrati

A time between ashes and roses is coming  
everything shall perish in it  
everything shall begin in it (Adonis 1992:35).

# I

It is easy to forget that the so-called Arab Spring uprisings in 2011 were initially seen as beacons of light indicating that the Middle East had started on a road that would potentially give the whole region democracy and respect for human rights. However, few, if any, of these positive signs remain today. Instead of peace and prosperity, the countries of the Middle East and North Africa are today tormented by civil unrest, terrorism, war, famine, migration, a lack of democracy and insufficient respect for humanity overall. As always, the poets are among those who have given voice to the sufferings of the common people. Poets and writers like, for example, Mahmoud Darwish (1941–2008), Nizar Qabbani (1923–1998) and Adonis (b. 1930) have all documented the pain, sorrow and despair that torments the inhabitants of the Levant.

For example, in *The Book of Siege*, the Syrian poet Adonis writes the following about the war in Lebanon:

The cities dissolve, and the earth is a card loaded with dust.

Only poetry knows how to pair itself to this space (Adonis 2010:197).

For the poet who knows how to approach atrocities, pain and suffering, the outcomes of the war are indescribable.<sup>1</sup> Adonis continues:

They found people in bags:

a person	without a head
a person	without hands, or tongue
a person	choked to death
and the rest had no shapes and no names.	

— Are you mad? Please

don't write about these things (Adonis 2010:198).

<sup>1</sup> As Nouri Gana (2010) has pointed out, several poets who write in Arabic have also been trapped by the problem that the German philosopher Theodor Adorno (1903–1969) faced after the horrors of the Second World War, who asked if it was fair and even possible to describe the horrors of wars and military conflicts in words? This dilemma is clearly present in the writings of the Syrian poet Adonis (b. 1930).

While Adonis (2016) is very explicit in his book *Violence and Islam* in blaming most of the problems in the Middle East on Islam, backward traditions, political dictatorship and a lack of human dignity, the aim of this article is to show that these explanations are nothing new for this poet. With the help of a few examples from Adonis' texts and poems that pre-date the publication of *Violence and Islam*, I will argue that Islam, 'tradition' and secularism are best described as recurring topoi in his writings.<sup>2</sup> However, while he has been applauded as an outstanding poet by many intellectuals, not the least in the Europe and North America, it is unclear how his more explicit writings on Islam, in the book *Violence and Islam*, have had an effect on his popularity. This is a topic that should be considered for future studies.

Even if Adonis stresses complexity and diversity when he describes the past and present situation of the Arab world, his portrayal of Islam and of so-called tradition has still a tendency to neglect internal variations and alternative explanations that do not fit his understandings of religion and of how society should be organized. By means of this procedure, Adonis often equates 'true' Islam with rigidity and a backward 'tradition' that holds back progress; this tendency is noticeable not least in the essay book *Violence and Islam*. Indeed, this work can even be read as disciplining Muslims, who, in his view, lack agency in so far as they follow 'tradition'. While Adonis is an admired poet in many parts of the world, not the least by many intellectuals in the West who has presented him as a possible Noble prize winner, the book, *Violence and Islam*, could also provide other readings. With this publication, he runs the risk of being used for other purposes, like, for example, stimulating anti-Muslim sentiments in the West.<sup>3</sup> Although the reception and use of his texts form an important and relevant topic for future research, this article will primarily provide some examples from Adonis' earlier books and poems predating *Violence and Islam* that can be related to Islam, tradition and the problems of the Middle East.

<sup>2</sup> Cf, for example, Mersal 2016 on Adonis and the Qur'an.

<sup>3</sup> On this topic, see, for example Lagervall 2016. A strong critique of Lagervall's readings can be found in Hesham 2016.

## II

A suitable starting point in analysing Adonis' oeuvre is the distinction he makes between tradition on the one hand and the creativity and freedom of the poet on the other. For Adonis tradition is closely linked to claims associated with the revelation of Islam. Since this religion is held to constitute the ultimate and perfect revelation, it is forbidden to overturn or reject its tradition. As a result, tradition has mostly become a shackle holding down and hindering creativity and change according to Adonis. His understanding of religion and so-called tradition is also that they have a negative impact on the language. For Adonis both Islam and Arabic poetry are stuck in a mode of repetition in constant imitation of the past, or *taqlid* in Arabic. To be creative and innovative is generally seen as something negative because it is an attempt to add to creation, so that the past is not something the poet should strive to overcome. On the contrary, the past is the future, and it is by returning to the past that society can become glorious again.<sup>4</sup>

Resonating with the great French historian Fernand Braudel (1902–1985) and his theory about the rule and function of the Mediterranean culture and the *longue duree*,<sup>5</sup> Adonis contrasts the supposed traditions of the Mediterranean with the Islamic cultural tradition. While the first is progressive and evolves over time – that is, from the ancient traditions of Babylon to the Greek and Roman civilizations and continuing with French and American surrealism and romanticism – the Islamic tradition only seeks to repeat itself such that the “human only moves forward if she moves backwards” (Adonis 1994:118). Although Adonis is well aware of the fact that his distinction is an ideal type and that the so-called Islamic tradition has encompassed progressive and innovative thinkers who have refined and developed Greek, Persian and Indian philosophy, science and cultures, he believes that the eagerness to return to a glorious past has put a halt to development. Consequently, the poet

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Adonis 1994 and Adonis 2016.

<sup>5</sup> On the methodology, research and importance of Braudel for the study of Mediterranean history, see, for example, Dursteler 2010:62–76.

is not free to express his or her thoughts, and there is very little room for creativity. Adonis writes:

He [i.e. the poet] is forbidden to have doubts, to rebel, to question the values he has inherited, he is forbidden to explore uncharted territories. He has to remain within the boundaries of the tradition, move within the aesthetic frames of the tradition, which he is forbidden to cross or break. He is a poet with a gag and shackles, trapped in a tunnel. Under these conditions, freedom appears to be impossible. Without freedom the world has no meaning, and humans stop being humans (Adonis 1994:119, my translation from the Swedish translation of the French original).

Thus, to formulate innovative thoughts, whether within the framework of theology, politics, poetry or culture, is generally seen as something negative or as an act inspired by the devil. For example, in the Qur'an both Shaytan and the poet are portrayed as deceivers who trick weak humans into leaving the straight path.<sup>6</sup> The past therefore dictates the future according to Adonis. Even with this fatalistic interpretation, it should be stressed that many poets and intellectuals have not been restricted by the fetters of the past and many have held high positions in Arab regimes during the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Nonetheless, in the classical Arabic literature it is still possible for Adonis to find examples of poets like Imru'l-Qays, Abu Mihjan al-Thaqafi, Abu Nuwas and Abu l-'Ala' al-Ma'arri who have also questioned tradition. Like Adonis these poets praise peace, justice, wine and women and carnal ecstasy, not legal and literal interpretations of what counts as tradition (c. Adonis 1994:151). But why these voices are not included in the so-called tradition or legacy of Islam is left unexplained, meaning for Adonis that they are simply reduced to unorthodox or inauthentic interpretations of pre-Islamic Arabia and Islam. In reconstruct-

<sup>6</sup> On Shaytan as a deceiver in the Qur'an, see, for example, Göran Larsson, "The Sound of Satan: Different Aspects of Whispering in Islamic theology," *Temenos*, 48:1 (2012), 49–64. The poet is seen as a cheat in the Quran (e.g. Q 26:224), because of which the Islamic tradition strongly emphasises that the Prophet Muhammad was not a poet or a soothsayer, but a prophet (e.g. Q 36:69).

ing the past in this way, one could argue that Adonis is not paying sufficient attention to the question of power and the fact that the interpretation of all political systems and religions (not only Islam) is a matter of power and of the question of who has the authority to stipulate what should be counted as orthodoxy or heresy. Adonis does not address the fact that the poets named above (except for Imru'l-Qays, who belongs to the pre-Islamic era) most likely self-identified as Muslims and that several other contemporary and later individuals count them as part of the tradition and maybe also of the Islamic legacy, because it does not fit his reading of the past and present.

### III

Besides his harsh critique of tradition and the rule and function of religion, Adonis is very critical of Arab nationalism and politics in the contemporary Middle East.<sup>7</sup> Although he was a supporter of social nationalism in his youth and then a devoted Arab nationalist, he has lately stressed the importance of pluralism and questioned the domination of so-called Arab identity. Today Adonis is a strong promoter of a so-called “Levantism” that commemorates pluralism and the rich history of the regions of the Middle East and North Africa.<sup>8</sup> Instead of upholding one religion and one ethnicity, Adonis celebrates “cosmopolitan humanism and multiple identities” and wants “to cast aside the narrow, resentful chauvinism espoused by Arab nationalists” (Salameh 2012:38). These destructive forces prevent us from seeing that the Middle East is the cradle of all civilizations (Salameh 2012:40ff.) and that all “true” poets and artists are “beyond geography, beyond languages and nationalism, and they belong to the creative world of humanity”, so that “in this sense there is neither East nor West.” (Adonis, quoted in Guyer 2006). Hence, for Adonis it was a big mistake to call the revolutions that took place in 2011 the Arab Spring. To be Middle Eastern

<sup>7</sup> On Adonis’ critique, see, for example Boullata 1988:109–112.

<sup>8</sup> On this concept, see Salameh 2012:46.

is not automatically equivalent to invoking an Arab identity, and by emphasising one ethnic identity or religious belonging over others, one is bound to neglect and downplay other participants in the revolution (Salameh 2012:56).

For example, in 2011 Adonis wrote an open letter to the Syrian president, Bashar al-Assad, stressing the danger of emphasising one identity, one religion and one interpretation at a time when it was necessary to embrace the richness and plurality that has always existed in Syria. In his letter, Adonis wrote: “A nation consumed by a need for ‘oneness’ in thought, opinions, language and belief is a culture of tyranny” (Quoted in Salameh 2012:57). From this point of view, Adonis holds that all interpretations of religions and politics that stress uniqueness and demand conformity and loyalty will only reduce the Other to something evil or satanic, thus setting up a dichotomy that makes it easier to persecute or even kill the Other because he is viewed as an enemy, a heretic, a disbeliever or an apostate.<sup>9</sup> Although many intellectuals have embraced Adonis’ conclusions about the current situation, the open letter to Assad and his statements in the Arab and Western media have stimulated criticism, and he has acquired many enemies. Simply by labelling Assad as the president of Syria, some critics have even accused him of not taking a clear stance against the Assad regime.<sup>10</sup>

It is also interesting to notice that Adonis does not pay much attention to the fact that his understanding and outline of Islam does not include any room for alternative interpretations or internal conflicts and by this procedure he is actually promoting a fundamentalist reading of the past that demand conformity and loyalty. Consequently, his is reducing Islam to something evil or satanic that is not open for interpretations or conflictual readings.

Following his belief in democracy, secularism and peaceful revolutions, Adonis explains:

<sup>9</sup> See, for example Larsson 2017:45–54.

<sup>10</sup> On this issue, see Saleh 2011, cf. for example, Salameh 2012:60–61.

I'm against the regimes of Ben Ali and Assad, *and* against the Islamist opposition, because I don't want to fight one despotism for the sake of another ... If we don't separate religion from the state and free women from Sharia law, we'll just have more despots. Military dictatorship controls your mind. But religious dictatorship controls your mind and body (Adonis quoted in Jaggi 2012).

Instead of peace, justice and democracy, Adonis holds that Syria was only rewarded with fundamentalism and dictators with new names and novel insignias. According to Adonis the revolution in Syria has become a living hell for its population, a disastrous outcome that is partly to do with political claims dressed up in a religious and sectarian vocabulary (Adonis 2016). Instead of having the best of the population in mind, the new leaders have only their own interests in mind. This is one of the main reasons why Adonis is striving for a democratic development based on a secular separation between religion and the state. In an interview with Jonathan Guyer for *The New York Review of Books*, he explains:

Nothing will change unless there is a separation between religion and the state. If we do not distinguish between what is religious and what is political, cultural, and social, nothing will change and the decline of the Arabs will worsen. Religion is not the answer to problems anymore. Religion is the cause of problems. That is why it needs to be separated. Every free human believes in what he wants, and we should respect that (Adonis quoted in Guuyer 2006).

However, this insight is not only addressed to poets and intellectuals. On the contrary, it is the inhabitants of the Middle East and North Africa who must come to this conclusion. To reach this insight, they must stop relying on foreign military powers and former colonial rulers and break with the nostalgia of the past. Even though the poet cannot introduce such a change, Adonis believes that the poet has the potential to alter the "relationship between things and words, so a new image of the



world can be born” (Quoted in Jaggi 2012). But for Adonis – and this is very important – it is not only the Arab world that must be transformed and reborn. The notion that the difficulties of the Middle East are global problems is clearly expressed in the following poem written after the terror attack on New York<sup>11</sup> and the United States in 9/11/2001:

The lower layers of creation                      Qāf      Lām<sup>12</sup> (Say)  
 Ghain              Guantanamo  
 A prison administered by capitalism on a communist island  
 A space flooded with alphabets like the clay  
 Of which Adam was made—(“the earth is a whore,” you said. But  
 Is she not the mother of all the angels?)  
 Shīn dāl              Human, animal shapes of all sorts are slaughtered and spread  
 raw on the  
                  tables of time.  
 Blood spilled as if it is seeping from the gardens of God.  
 Mīm The enslaver/the enslaved              an adulteration or mollification of the  
                  dualism of master/slave.  
 Sīn Shīn      Sanctifying death.              Virtue that is  
                  evil              Evil that is virtue.  
 And through that is merely wash water.

In the beginning was crime  
 (“what do they want  
 those who do not want peace or justice,  
 and do not want terrorism?”)  
 Saint-Just, for example.

Hā’ (Is there anything human in a human being?)  
 Thā’ No revenge without justice: thus spoke Aeschylus.

<sup>11</sup> The city of New York is a site that Adonis has written poetry about before, see for example Adonis 1990.

<sup>12</sup> The original English translation contains Arabic fonts, but because of print technical reasons I have transcribed the Arabic letters.

Revenge first, this is how New York speaks.  
You have done well, Jim Morrison, speaking of an American night.  
Imruulqais, al-Mutannabi, Al-Ma‘ari—  
Say: who can now speak well of his planet ... this Arab night?  
Ah, how tired the earth must be!  
Truly,  
From the struggle between nūn yā’ and kāf (fuck)  
the world’s tragedy began (Adonis 2010:306-307).

In all its complexity, the poem quoted above is a strong lamentation for the sorrow and misery that is caused by war, terrorism and injustice.

#### CONCLUSIONS

This article has provided some examples from Adonis’ earlier books and poems that can be related to Islam, tradition and the current problems in the Middle East. While his book *Violence and Islam* is very explicit in its criticism of Islam, I have argued that Adonis has cultivated a rather stereotypical and essentialist understanding of Islam and its tradition(s) for a long time. Irrespective of Adonis’ emphasis on the Middle East’s complex and multidimensional past, his own reading of Islam and Muslims is often one-dimensional, with a tendency to neglect or downplay internal variations over time and place. So, instead of paying attention to the sources that paint a complex and conflictual history over how to interpret Islam, Adonis’ ambition is to provide one unified explanation for all the problems in the Middle East, that is, Islam as a religious and political system.

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#### ABSTRACT

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of the problems in the Middle East on Islam, backward traditions, political dictatorship and a lack of human dignity, the aim of this article is to show that these explanations are nothing new for this poet. With the help of a few examples from Adonis' texts and poems that pre-date the publication of *Islam and Violence*, I will argue that Islam, 'tradition' and secularism are best described as recurring topoi in his writings.

KEYWORDS: Adonis, Islam, Poetry, tradition, democracy